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| --- |
| commas |

Use a comma **to separate the elements in a series** (three or more things), including the last two. "He hit the ball, dropped the bat, and ran to first base." You may have learned that the comma before the "and" is unnecessary, which is fine if you're in control of things. However, there are situations in which, if you don't use this comma (especially when the list is complex or lengthy), these last two items in the list will try to glom together (like macaroni and cheese). Using a comma between *all the items in a series, including the last two,* avoids this problem. This last comma—the one between the word "and" and the preceding word—is often called the **serial comma** or the **Oxford comma**. In newspaper writing, incidentally, you will seldom find a serial comma, but that is not necessarily a sign that it should be omitted in academic prose.

**Use a comma + a little conjunction** (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so) **to connect two** [**independent clauses**](http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/clauses.htm), as in "He hit the ball well, **but** he ran toward third base."

Contending that the coordinating conjunction is adequate separation, some writers will leave out the comma in a sentence with short, balanced independent clauses (such as we see in the example just given). If there is ever any doubt, however, use the comma, as it is always correct in this situation.

One of the most frequent errors in comma usage is the placement of a comma *after* a coordinating conjunction. We cannot say that the comma will always come before the conjunction and never after, but it would be a rare event, indeed, that we need to follow a coordinating conjunction with a comma. When speaking, we do sometimes pause after the little conjunction, but there is seldom a good reason to put a comma there.